

(Washington, D.C.) - Yesterday, Congressman Ciro D. Rodriguez (TX-23) introduced the "Veterans Mental Health Enhancement Act," a bill aimed at improving access to mental health services for our veterans and returning soldiers. Rodriguez' bill allows the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to increase their mental health service capacity by allowing them to contract out to community mental health centers, extending the reach of mental health services provided to our returning soldiers and current veterans by the VA.

"Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other psychological trauma are the invisible injuries of war that affect not only the brave men and women who serve our country, but also their families, loved ones, and community as they transition back into civilian life," said Congressman Rodriguez. "It is clear that our soldiers are returning with an increased need for mental health services, but after this long war, it is unclear what the VA's capacity will be to fulfill this need."

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimates more than 26% of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have some form of mental illness or disorder. Congressman Rodriguez introduced the bill yesterday with Congresswoman Grace Napolitano (CA-38) and representatives and supporters from the Texas Council of Community Mental Health Centers, National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare, National Association of Counties, National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors, and US Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association.

"Many returning military have PTSD and do not self-identify their illness until there is a crisis - DUI, domestic violence, child abuse, divorce, homicide, even suicide," said Leon Evan, chairman-elect of the National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors, and CEO of the Bexar County, TX Center for Health Care Services. "We must develop stronger mental health care for our veterans, and I am proud to support Congressman Rodriguez's bill as a great step towards truly addressing this growing problem."

"Our veterans have sacrificed for our country, and we must honor them with high quality health care services, including high quality mental health care so they can more smoothly transition back to civilian life and properly cope with their wartime experiences," said Congressman Rodriguez. "I am proud to introduce this bill that will increase the ability of the VA to expand its capacity by collaborating with experienced and qualified Community Health Care Centers."

Congressman Rodriguez is a former social worker who currently serves on the House Committee on Veterans Affairs and House Committee on Appropriations.